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## Fernando Leña's "Coward"

L.M. Grow



Fernando Leña is among the footnotes to history, in this case the history of modern Philippine literature in English. He is so little recognized that he is not even mentioned in Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg (1987). But, somewhat surprisingly, he is included among the writers interviewed in Alegre and Fernandez (1984, 122-23). I say "surprisingly" not because Leña lacked talent but because of his truncated career as a published author of prose fiction.

Leña reminisced about his UP undergraduate days: "So Villa and Rotor said: 'Why don't you write for publication?' 'You teach me,' I said. So they gave me lessons on how to write and develop incidents to a climax, with an O. Henry twist at the end. Then came the contest for the Romulo Gold Medal for short story writing. My story won first prize. Rotor and Villa said, 'You learn too fast; we won't teach you anymore'" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 122-23). But Leña went on to develop his talent.

Mrs. Paz Marquez Benitez polished my style and technique and was the prime mover of my development as a writer in English. (Leña in Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 123)

I was with the *Collegian* from 1925 to 1929 as reporter and editor, and I was practically the only one occupying the room of the *Collegian*. So I invited members of the UP Writers Club to come over and discuss current literature. Sometimes we invited Professor Moore or Dr. Conklin to be with us. We discussed such matters as the style of Wilbur Daniel Steele, and of William Saroyan, who was experimenting with ways of using English. Also the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and Amy Lowell; and the plays of Bernard Shaw, Vidal Tan, Carlos P. Romulo—and each other's stories and poems.

ENA: How often would these sessions take place?

FL: Almost every day. They were informal gatherings of the writers, who dominated the *Collegian*. That's how we developed. (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 124)

Leaño's acumen emerges clearly in the remarks chronicled in Alegre and Fernandez (1984, 132), particularly in his analysis of his contemporaries; e.g. Paz Marquez Benitez: "I asked her about particular paragraphs of her stories which were designed to create a picture and an emotion" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 132). Again, "It was Arguilla who pioneered in local color, which he achieved without using Ilocano words—as in stories like 'Midsummer' and 'How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife'" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 125). With respect to Villa: "He knew how to create color out of words. Read his poem 'What is a Poem?' 'A poem is a song' 'A poem is a rose,' 'A poem is a blue color in the sky.' It's like that, all imagery" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 125). Concerning Rotor: "He was an outstanding perfectionist; his stories are polished, not the kind written in two hours. He revises them continuously until he achieves perfection. Among the poets, Amador T. Daguio worked hardest to earn excellence. Every afternoon, for almost one year, Daguio was tutored in poetry by Prof. Tom Inglis Moore" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 125–26). And of Will Durant: "who was writing history in a new way, more like a short story. He writes history from the present tense—conversation first, then the gist, the meat of it" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 133).

Leaño did not run out of material; in response to Fernandez' question, "Do you still write regularly?" he said, "Yes, almost every day. The urge to write is in me." He stopped publishing, however, because "it interfered with corporate law" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 135). But what he meant by "interfered" was: "Every time we had a board meeting, Severino Tuason would tease: 'What is the matter with our lawyer? He writes love stories?' Because of these jokes, I stopped writing stories for publication" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 122). Why did he not simply revert to a pen name? Others did so for less cause; e.g., Bienvenido N. Santos, who at the same period felt that he was flooding the market, and so adopted "Eugenio Lingad," "Thomas Mendoza," and "Alejandro P. Rito."

Admittedly, the method by which he collected story ideas sounds a bit too close for comfort like Oliver Wendell Holmes' practice of writing occasional verse for the parties and other functions he attended (see Leaño's revelations about Mrs. Schmertz and Mr. Sassoon in Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 121). But Leaño had both insight and talent, as both his creative work and his remarks about literature demonstrate.

## "Coward"

Asked to name his best work, Leño cited "Editor and Society" and "Coward" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 132), the only two of his stories which most readers have probably heard of. "Coward" might at first strike the reader as no more than a typical romantic idyll, undistinguished from its sentimental contemporaries (Leño 1930 in Yabes 1975). But "Coward" is quite distinguishable from the common run, not only because of its smoothly-polished prose, but, more importantly, because of its thematic development. The story concerns a visit by the narrator and Luis Gondinez to Baguio, where the latter falls in love with Amparo Andersen. The romance blossoms until two mishaps expose Luis' cowardice. First, a runaway horse with a frightened girl on it bolts past Luis, who does nothing to try to stop it. This incident the narrator smooths over, but, after the second, Luis is so mortified that he simply runs off and is not heard of again. Luis, strolling in the forest with Lolita Shinn and Amparo, comes across a dog's nest and picks up a puppy. The angry mother dog returns and attacks. Luis climbs up a large rock, leaving the girls below to fend for themselves. Bites and torn dresses later, they chase away the dog and then chastise Luis: "The girls called him coward and wished him eaten by the dog" ("Coward," 141). The ending of the story has the O. Henry surprise—seemingly an obligatory feature of a writer rooted in the 1920s. Five years later, the narrator comes across Amparo, weeping over her dog, one of the puppies which Luis took from the nest of the dog that petrified him and which he had the narrator give to Amparo as a parting remembrance:

"I love him," she confessed. . . . "Once a girl loves she feels the mother's instinct over her man, magnifies his virtues and forgives his faults . . . I was aware of his frailty even before the runaway horse nearly struck him, and I was more than ready to forgive him than any of you. There were other times when he was afraid, and I acted as if I didn't notice. He was very sensitive and he tried piteously to control his fear until I was tempted to throw my arms around him and steady him."

"Did he know you love him" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "He loved me as no woman has ever been loved. I can see it now why he ran away. He wanted to free me from the calamity of loving a coward." Her head dropped on her dog and she wept. "As if I cared." ("Coward" 143-44)

In terms of strict consistency, this ending clashes with the story's plot and thus might be construed as an effort to install a surprise ending no matter what. If Amparo is aware all along of Luis' cowardice, why does she, along with Ms. Shinn, call him coward and wish him devoured by the dog? Wouldn't this be the time to "throw my arms around him and steady him"? Of course, we could counter, love is not always logical; or Amparo needed to put up a front to save face with her friend; or Amparo was so angry that she momentarily forgot herself.

But I think that the incongruity of the ending is more comfortably explained on the basis of theme. The ending is a confirmation that macho ruggedness is not the prime virtue in life and that to be a man does not mean to be a hero only. This idea, of course, is to cut against the grain of centuries of popular belief extending from the Roman *virtus* to the Hemingway code hero. Ironically, Leña responded to Fernandéz's question "Do you like Hemingway?" "Yes, that's one writer I like very much. I like the way he develops an idea that will challenge the imagination. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls* how he writes! Not like writers before him. He uses language to bring out an idea; the picture, different from Matthew Arnold and other English writers" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 133). It is hard to imagine two characters with value structures more dissimilar than Luis Godinez and Robert Jordan, though admittedly what Leña seems to be principally praising here is Hemingway's empiricism, achieved through palpability of imagery.

Though we might be tempted to consider the eighteenth century focus that Jane Austen ridiculed in *Sense and Sensibility* or the nineteenth century movement spearheaded by Poe and Baudelaire to be the predecessors of Leña, this is only approximately so since these earlier cults did not see physical hardihood and sentient refinement as mutually exclusive. But for Amparo, Luis, and, up to a point Lolita, the reaches of the imagination are the quintessential experiences in life:

Luis Gondinez had been wonderful, Lolita said. His rich fancy had been very delightful. He knew where to find the hidden, gurgling, little falls and the rocks to step on to look at wells formed by stones where the brown sand showed in fine threads through the transparent blue of a gentle whirlpool. He showed them wild flowers that arched their necks like little ladies. It had all seemed so real in that mellow shaded brook under the spell of his softly musical voice.

Amparo Andersen had been no less fanciful. She talked of fairies and nymphs and oreads. When Luis had been explaining how the fine threads of sand were made by the gentle eddies, Amparo had excitedly pointed to an oread sifting sand above them and which had suddenly changed into a big shell. ("Coward" 141)

What saves this tone from becoming precious, a fluttering away into the *Peter Pan* realm of the pretty-pretty, is a delicate hue of irony. This may explain Leaño's otherwise perplexing remark about his work:

DGF: Would you say your stories were more or less like Steele's?

FL: No, because his stories were serious, and mine were not.

(Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 132)

Our first clue to the presence of this irony is in the narrator's handling of the Baguio region, which is done somewhere between *Blame It On Rio* and *Brigadoon*:

Baguio, with its soft shadows and its pine-scented air, is bad by itself, but add a pretty girl with the *cloying* voice of Amparo Andersen, and you have a *combination that beats a bottle of Scotch in driving a young man crazy* (my emphasis). Things happen in Baguio at the slightest suggestion; jokes have startling effects on young people. That city on the mountains is abnormal, unreal; your heart flutters at an unusual beat, and pumps hot blood to your head making you think crazy thoughts. Glamor intensifies emotion and covers everything with a soft radiance that makes the heart ache with desire. It is a dream, beautiful while it lasts, full of enchanted palaces, adorned with flimsy fabrics, delicate and fanciful that may, at a rough touch, break leaving only memories. ("Coward" 137)

Although the highlighted phrases are particularly noticeable, the irony throughout is hardly invisible. Tongue-in-cheek, the narrator here does what Aristide Pujol does in "The Adventure of the Kind Mr. Smith."

Yet the irony does not erode the theme. The delicacy of Leaño's touch makes it possible for the narrator to share, while wryly recognising the limitations and hazards of, Luis' enchantment: "The forest floor was open and clear, and the big pines rose up and met overhead like pillars of gothic temples, with the sunlight filtering through the leaves and illuminating the forest floor with a soft light.

We were not aware of the temples then; we were only conscious of the sensuous breeze, the pine scents, the floating laughter, and the glamorous shadows all about us" ("Coward" 138). Cf., Hemingway's park-like woods.

At times, light-edged irony reverts to parody, but the parody does not undermine the theme or the supporting seriousness of tone—however modulated with irony—because we already know that the narrator is committed to, even while he pooh-poohs, the romantic ideal:

Luis Gondinez was worse than anybody. He dashed off silly lyrics and set them to music, all inspired by and dedicated to Amparo Andersen. I still have some of them but I tore the silliest ones when, one night, I found him at ten o'clock passing back and forth in front of Pines Hotel.

"What are you doing here?" I caught and shook his arm.

"I am watching her window," he said without embarrassment. "I have not seen her since this morning; just a glimpse of her shadow and then I am going to sleep." ("Coward" 137)

The infinitive variety of curves, rocks, nooks, and pools, the whisper of hidden waters sliding around stones, the lacy ferns, the filtered sunlight making patterns on the ground, and the total absence of city sounds, give to the little stream an air of romance, of impending possibilities of the happening of the unusual, as the meeting of a fairy or a *dead sweetheart* (my emphasis). ("Coward" 141)

This is the outlook of *Northanger Abbey*, not *The Castle of Otranto*, but its gentleness preserves the story's wistful tone.

At story's end, however, we have a reversal of a reversal. Why does Luis leave the pup with Amparo? It is a palpable and painful reminder of an incident surely better forgotten. As one critic has said, if the ghost had meant to be kind to Hamlet he would have said "forget me," not "remember me." And the same is true here. Is this Leña's way of saying that the affection of Luis and Amparo is merely puppy love? No, it symbolises an irrecoverable loss: Luis' innocence. Luis' sensitivity is not sustainable in the face of the harsh realities of life—runaway horses and vicious dogs. That these are symbolic is evident from their *deus ex machina* character. The runaway horse episode by itself would have to be classified as possible but improbable. The dog's nest in the middle of a forest is highly unlikely; and both the horse and the dog incidents occurring so closely together stretch credulity.

When Luis extracts the puppy from its nest, he has entered the hard, sometimes even brutal, realm of real life, leaving fairies and oreads behind. Baguio is Eden; Luis must leave it when he takes the dog; because he is "coward" no longer he is sensitive soul no longer. He is later untraceable because that self no longer exists. And this is tragic, for Luis could have kept his sensitivity and his Amparo. But he has opted to surrender them to societal pressure to be "a man," defined as some critics have scornfully referred to Hemingway's heroes: "a big oaf," "size fifty-four jacket and size two cap."

As a close look at "Coward" reveals, it is also tragic that Leño is not among those whom Bienvenido N. Santos (1976) has so touchingly referred to as the "stragglers" in modern Philippine literature in English. In fact, it would be tempting to see Leño playing Prospero to his creative art here, bidding farewell as Luis does to the reaches of imagination in favor of the mundanity of everyday existence, a farewell made plangent because it came not, as in the case of D. Paulo Dizon, from a premature death of the body, but because of a premature departure for the Dukedom of Milan.

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